President Roosevelt to Pope Pius XII

WASHINGTON, December 23, 1939.

YOUR HOLINESS: Because, at this Christmas time, the world is in sorrow, it is especially fitting that I send you a message of greeting and of faith.

The world has created for itself a civilization capable of giving to mankind security and peace firmly set in the foundations of religious teachings. Yet, though it has conquered the earth, the sea, and even the air, civilization today passes through war and travail.

I take heart in remembering that in a similar time, Isaiah first prophesied the birth of Christ. Then, several centuries before His coming, the condition of the world was not unlike that which we see today. Then, as now, a conflagration had been set; and nations walked dangerously in the light of the fires they had themselves kindled. But in that very moment a spiritual rebirth was foreseen—a new day which was to loose the captives and to consume the conquerors in the fire of their own kindling; and those who had taken the sword were to perish by the sword. There was promised a new age wherein through renewed faith the upward progress of the human race would become more secure.

Again, during the several centuries which we refer to as the Dark Ages, the flame and sword of barbarians swept over Western civilization; and, again, through a rekindling of the inherent spiritual spark in mankind, another rebirth brought back order and culture and religion.

I believe that the travail of today is a new form of these old conflicts. Because the tempo of all worldly things has been so greatly accelerated in these modern days we can hope that the period of darkness and destruction will be vastly shorter than in the olden times.

In their hearts men decline to accept, for long, the law of destruction forced upon them by wielders of brute force. Always they seek, sometimes in silence, to find again the faith without which the welfare of nations and the peace of the world cannot be rebuilt.

I have the rare privilege of reading the letters and confidences of thousands of humble people, living in scores of different nations. Their names are not known to history, but their daily work and courage carry on the life of the world. I know that these, and uncounted numbers like them in every country, are looking for a guiding light. We remember that the Christmas Star was first seen by shepherds in the hills, long before the leaders knew of the Great Light which had entered the world.

I believe that while statesmen are considering a new order of things, the new order may well be at hand. I believe that it is even now being built, silently but inevitably, in the hearts of masses whose voices are not heard, but whose common faith will write the final history of our time. They know that unless there is belief in some guiding principle and some trust in a divine plan, nations are without light, and peoples perish. They know that the civilization handed down to us by our fathers was built by men and women who knew in their hearts that all were brothers because they were children of God. They believe that by His will enmities can be healed; that in His mercy the weak can find deliverance, and the strong can find grace in helping the weak.

In the grief and terror of the hour, these quiet voices, if they can be heard, may yet tell of the rebuilding of the world.

It is well that the world should think of this at Christmas.

Because the people of this nation have come to a realization that time and distance no longer exist in the older sense, they understand that that which harms one segment of humanity harms all the rest. They know that only by friendly association between the seekers of light and the seekers of peace everywhere can the forces of evil be overcome.

In these present moments, no spiritual leader, no civil leader can move forward on a specific plan to terminate destruction and build anew. Yet the time for that will surely come.

It is, therefore, my thought that though no given action or given time may now be prophesied, it is well that we encourage a closer association between those in every part of the world—those in religion and those in government—who have a common purpose.

I am, therefore, suggesting to Your Holiness that it would give me great satisfaction to send to you my personal representative in order that our parallel endeavors for peace and the alleviation of suffering may be assisted.

When the time shall come for the reestablishment of world peace on a surer foundation, it is of the utmost importance to humanity and to religion that common ideals shall have united expression.

Furthermore, when that happy day shall dawn, great problems of practical import will face us all. Millions of people of all races, all nationalities and all religions may seek new lives by migration to other lands or by reestablishment of old homes. Here, too, common ideals call for parallel action.

I trust, therefore, that all of the churches of the world which believe in a common God will throw the great weight of their influence into this great cause.

To you, whom I have the privilege of calling a good friend and an old friend, I send my respectful greetings at this Christmas Season.

Cordially yours,

FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT